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AUTHOR Wertz, Dorothy C.
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ABSTRACT

A cross-cultural and historical survey of the relationship between slavery and the status of women focuses on Marxian theory, the position of free women, sexual division of labor, the threat of rape, and equivalents of slavery in the modern world. Throughout history, the majority of slaves have been women, many of whom held favored positions, dependent, however, upon the whim of the owner. Differing theories exist about whether the existence of slavery lowered or raised the status of free women. Marx suggests that patriarchy is an extension of slavery; others maintain that slavery relieved a wife from tedious chores and thus raised her position while lowering her economic value. The reversal of sex roles under slavery in some cultures led to women's being assigned to hard labor, with the effect of decreasing their reproductive capabilities. In the Caribbean, the slave population diminished so that slaves had to be imported. The widespread submission to rape occurred because of threats of violence or with the hope that some privilege would be gained. One may observe the current equivalents to slavery in the large-scale death camps of Nazi Germany and in the smaller-scale wife and child abuse. (KC)

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Women and Slavery: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Dr. Dorothy C. Wertz
Adjunct Associate Professor
Social and Behavioral Sciences Section
School of Public Health
Boston University
80 East Concord Street
Boston, MA 02118

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Abstract

In most slave-holding societies, the majority of slaves have been women. Nieboer and other authorities on slavery have pointed out that "woman was the first slave" because women were easier to capture and to keep. Often the positions of the female slave and the secondary wife have been indistinguishable, and the question has arisen as to how slavery has differed from marriage in many societies. Using Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery as the total power of one human being over another, and drawing examples from different cultures and historical periods, this paper examines the following areas of theoretical interest: 1) the statements of Marx, Engels, and others that slavery is an extension of patriarchy; 2) the complex relationship between slavery and the position of freewomen, who sometimes enjoy a limited gain in status at the expense of female slaves, while remaining under patriarchal control; 3) the sexual division of labor under slavery, which often reverses social norms; 4) the threat of rape as a means of enforcing obedience on female slaves; and 5) functional equivalents of slavery in the modern world, which range from the large-scale (the death camps) to the very private (wife and child abuse).

Abstract

In most slaveholding societies throughout history, the majority of slaves have been women. This paper examines (1) the reasons why women have formed the majority of slaves; (2) the relationship between the presence of slavery in a society and the status of freewomen; (3) changes in women's and men's occupational roles under slavery; (4) the use of rape as a means of social control of slaves; and (5) the evolution of slavery or its functional equivalents in the modern world, as related to the status of women.

Women and Slavery: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Slavery can be defined as the unlimited power of one human being over another, including the power of life and death. This power is maintained by the use of violence or the continued threat of violence, which can be just as effective. In all traditional systems of slavery, both power and violence were personal rather than impersonal in nature. Although slavery has frequently been economically profitable for the owners, this has not always been the case. Slavery has existed in societies with widely differing types of economic organizations, including some where, instead of generating a surplus, the slaves consumed it, becoming in essence expensive possessions who demonstrated the owner's wealth and social status.[1] Slavery has been found even in subsistence economies depending on hunting-gathering.[2] The essence of slavery as an institution appears to be symbolic: slavery exists for the aggrandizement of the owner through personal domination over another.

In order to examine the psychosocial basis of slavery, it is necessary to look, not only at societies that held slaves on a large scale, but at the many societies that held only a few slaves. There are no discernible structural differences between slaveholding and non-slaveholding societies.[3] Although slaves usually have an economic function in agricultural and industrial societies, they have symbolic and ritual functions as well, and in hunting-gathering, fishing, or pastoral societies these symbolic functions are of primary importance. Although it has frequently been claimed that the institution of slavery requires the existence of an elite class, symbolic elites can be found even in subsistence economies, as can sexual stratification.

In most slaveholding societies, the majority of slaves have been women.[4] This paper examines (1) the reasons for the predominance of women under slavery; (2) the relationship between the presence of slavery in a society

and the status of freewomen; (3) changes in women's and men's occupational roles under slavery; (4) the use of rape as a means of social control of slaves; and (5) the evolution of slavery or its functional equivalents in the modern world, as related to the status of women.

1. Reasons for the Predominance of Women Slaves

Women were apparently the first slaves. In ancient Mesopotamia, the sign for "slave girl", derived from the expression for "foreign country," appeared before the sign denoting "slave."[5] In ancient China, where slavery first appeared in the Chou Dynasty (1027-222 B.C.), the majority of slaves have always been women, right up until the abolition of slavery in this century. The Chinese symbol for slave is woman-hand-child; the Arabic slave is woman-held-in-hand. The only slave-holding societies where the majority of slaves have clearly been male are the societies of the New World, ancient Greece, and possibly also Rome.

Why has this been so? Biot, an abolitionist writing in the 1840s, argued that "woman was the first slave",[6] because women were easier to capture and easier to keep once captured, an argument also put forward by Sumner, Patterson, and other sociologists concerned with slavery.[7] According to this view, the origins of slavery lie in warfare and the taking of prisoners. Usually most of the male prisoners would be killed (or eaten, according to Engels),[8] because they were too troublesome to keep and subdue, while the women and children would be enslaved. In Patterson's definition, slavery is a relationship of personal domination which is highly paternalistic and therefore easier to impose upon women.

There is another reason for the predominance of women as slaves in most

slave systems: most societies found women slaves more useful than men. The fact that prices for women slaves were higher than for men slaves in many slave-holding societies, from Bronze Age Syria and Mesopotamia (where they were weavers) to nineteenth-century Africa, is an indicator that they were regarded as more useful. In ancient Ireland the female slave was actually the unit of currency.[9] The usefulness of female slaves had several dimensions. It is important to remember that in most societies slaves were used for domestic labor or for symbolic purposes (to aggrandize the owner's ego or social status by demonstrating his total power over another human being), not for large-scale economic production. For example, among the New Zealand Maori slavery functioned primarily to maintain the ritual and power status of polygynous tribal leaders, who immediately lost all power and status when the missionaries abolished slavery.[10] Slaves were frequently kept when they had no economically productive value at all. In Hong Kong, slaves did not generate a surplus, but consumed it.[11] Among the Cherokee, a subsistence economy, slaves were of no use whatsoever, and seem to have been kept as symbolic examples of the perpetual "outsider."[12] In those societies where the primary use of slaves was for large-scale production, as in the Americas, the majority of slaves tended to be male. Where slaves were kept primarily for domestic use or symbolic value, the majority were usually female, with the male slaves assigned to traditionally female tasks.

Female slaves had a further use. They could be used by the owner to expand his lineage by producing additional children. In much of West Africa, and in other societies where children took their status from both parents, these children, while frequently recognized as legitimate, could not compete for power and prestige with the offspring of legitimate (free) wives. These children of slave concubines would increase a man's lineage, to which they

owed loyalty, but because of their subordinate status would be less likely to contribute to power conflicts among heirs. In many African societies, the major reason for the purchase of female slaves was to increase the lineage. In a matrilineal society such as Comoro in East Africa, slaves could provide a man with children that were his alone, not linked to his matrilineage.[13] In societies where children took their descent from both parents, including most Moslem societies, the children of slave mothers and free fathers had a somewhat greater chance of social mobility; several sultans were the children of slave mothers. Even if the owner of female slaves did not feel a need to increase the size of his lineage, concubines could serve him as objects of conspicuous consumption and increase his status.

The slave purchased as a concubine gained a status similar to that of a subordinate wife. Manumission, in those societies where it was customarily given to slaves who had borne a child for the owner, was primarily symbolic and did not change the woman's usual duties or way of life. Such women were not always assured of manumission, even in Moslem societies where the law required that a slave becoming pregnant by her owner be freed. The children, however, were usually free and without any hereditary stigma. In West Africa, and many other societies, women slaves served as vehicles for the assimilation of slaves into free society. Assimilation, either through concubinage, adoption, or outright manumission, was the fate of the descendents of slaves in most societies, again with the exception of North America.

Societies where men purchased concubines were also likely to be societies where men purchased freewomen as wives. Goody has found a positive correlation between the presence of polygyny, bridewealth, and slavery. All three are more likely to exist where women are regarded as economically productive. Dowry is found in societies where women are regarded as economically unproductive

and is negatively correlated with slavery.[14] In China, purchase of a wife was so expensive that many families found it cheaper to buy female children as "little daughters-in-law"(future secondary wives) for their sons. If the marriage did not take place, the girl was given the status of an ordinary female slave. There was considerable fluidity between the positions of secondary wife and slave: the slave might become a subordinate wife, but subordinate ("little") wives, unlike the principal ("big") wife, might be sold into slavery in times of famine. Legally, all women belonged to the men who had acquired them, but the principal wife was rarely sold.[15] Probably the factor most influencing the status of a wife in a male-dominated society such as China was the power of her family of origin. In the case of a wife who was purchased as a child, her family had signed away all rights in her, including the power of life and death, at the time of sale. Usually they signed an agreement that if an "accident" should befall the child at any time after the sale they would not complain. The family of a free wife, on the other hand, retained rights to retaliate if she were killed or sold by her husband.

2. The Status of Slavewomen

The positions of female slave and secondary wife have been so similar in many slaveholding societies that sociologists as diverse as Marx and Engels on the one hand and Sumner on the other have argued that slavery is simply an extension of patriarchy. According to Engels' interpretation of Fourier, "in a given society the emancipation of women is the natural measure of the general emancipation."[16] The Communist Manifesto argues that the bourgeois wife is similar to the slave in that her husband sees in her "a mere instrument of production,"[17] as the slaveholder had seen his concubines for millenia.

This statement brings to mind a poignant description in Mary Chesnut's Civil War Diaries, of a slave woman being sold on the block, "magnificently gotten up in silks and satins. She seemed delighted with it all . . . sometimes ogling the bidders and sometimes looking quite coy and modest, but her mouth never relaxed from its expanded grin of excitement." Chesnut compared her to all women who "sell themselves and are sold in marriage from queens downward," and remarked that "There is no slave after all like a wife. All married women, all children and girls, who live in their father's houses, are slaves." Southern women, she said, "whimper and whine because they are beggars. Women are bought and sold, deprived of liberty, property, and rights and equal protection of the law, humiliated and reduced to abject dependency." . . . "Women are bought and sold everywhere. And they [Yankee women] talk as if money only bought black women in slave countries."[18] According to this view, although freewomen might be slaveholders, they themselves were enslaved by a patriarchal system. Nieboer, author of the classic Slavery as an Industrial System, considered the subjection of women so widespread and so natural that he excluded from his definition of a slaveholding society those societies in which the only slaves were women. Only the enslavement of males "counted" as slavery, according to Nieboer's definition; slavery, or something close to it, was the natural condition of females in many preliterate societies.[19]

Those who claim that all women are enslaved in patriarchal societies are using the word "slavery" very loosely. They overlook the fact that however abject the condition of women in a society, there remain important legal and symbolic distinctions between slave women and even the most subordinate of free wives. The primary distinctions concern the legitimacy of marriage and parents' legal control over the children. Although in many patriarchal societies a freewoman's control over the fate of her children was limited and

subject to her husband's veto, in legal terms it always exceeded the control that could be exercised by slave women.

In no slave-holding society has slave marriage ever been recognized as legitimate or have slaves ever had legal control over the disposition of their children. Even though most slave "marriages" may have remained undisturbed by the owners, and most slave children may have remained with their parents, the threat of separation remained very real to the slaves, however rarely carried out. It made little difference to slaves' feelings of security that "only 5%" of slave children in the United States were sold away from their parents, as historians now tell us.[20] Every slave mother knew that her children could become part of that number at any time and that there was nothing she could do to prevent it. As the narrative of ex-slave Lewis Hayden reported, "Intelligent colored people in my circle of acquaintance, as a general thing, felt no security whatsoever for their family ties."[21]

The slave and her children therefore had no legitimate ancestry, even though she might still have intact kinship ties. Anthropologists have described the "essential kinlessness of slaves" in African societies. In China, slaves did not have "real" surnames, because "slaves had no ancestors."[22] This explains the symbolic importance of manumission even though it frequently left a woman's daily life unchanged. Usually the best route to manumission (except in North America and the Caribbean) was to bear the owner's children, though this did not always suffice. Women manumitted in this way, or more frequently their children, were then amalgamated into free society. Again, North America was the exception, because slave women were not used to extend the owner's lineage, manumission was extremely rare, though more common for women than for men, and manumitted slaves were not assimilated into English-speaking societies. In most slave-holding societies, however, manumission not only

gave a woman certain very important legal securities in the domestic sphere, but it also was the first step toward upward social mobility for her descendents.

The elusive factor differentiating between the positions of slave concubine and free wife are perhaps best summarized in the word "honor." This explains some paradoxical situations in history where slaves appeared to have great power and prestige. The concubines of an important man frequently lived better and had more status and prestige than the wives of free peasants, but this status was temporary and depended entirely upon the favor of the owner. If a concubine lost favor, she had no inherent rights and no family of origin to protect her. She had no "honor" attaching permanently to her person: whatever momentary prestige she enjoyed was entirely dependent on the power of another. This explains why manumission was of such great symbolic importance to these women, even if it did not change their everyday lives. The male corollary was found in the Ptolemaic and Turkish empires, where most of the important government officials were slaves, Althought these men had great apparent wealth, power, and prestige, they in fact had no power except through the emperor or sultan, and could be deprived of everything, even their lives, at their superior's whim, without any right to contest his decision.

3. Slavery and the Position of Freewomen

It is an open question whether the existence of slavery in a society raises or lowers the position of that society's freewomen. There are several theoretical issues involved. One of these is whether there is a discernible relationship cross-culturally between type of social structure and the status of women. A more fundamental problem is how measure the status of women. Anthropologists have attempted to correlate such factors as bride-wealth, dowry, bride capture, descent, etc., and have found that women's

rights of inheritance and disposal of property are probably the best existing indicators of their power in a society.[23] Using this as a measure of women's status, anthropologists are still attempting to find relationships between particular social structures and the status of women.

The presence of absence of slavery has sometimes been credited with changing the status of a society's women. Engels regarded the presence or absence of slavery as an indicator of the relative degree of the emancipation of women; a society where the institution of slavery was present would be more likely to subject its "freewomen" to a subordinate status analogous to that of slaves. A society where there was no slavery, and thus no model for the subjection of one human being to the power of another, would be more likely to accord women more rights and freedoms. Conversely, a society that had emancipated its women from subordination would also be a society that had developed far enough to have emancipated its slaves.[24] For Engels, the emancipation of women and the abolition of slavery would go hand-in-hand. In the United States, the Women's Suffrage Movement developed from the Abolitionist Movement.

The opposite argument, that freewomen gained a degree of emancipation through the existence of slavery, has appeared more frequently in sociological theory. According to Biot, "[slaves] take over woman's tasks and her social position rises, her condition is ameliorated."[25] Sumner argued that the sexual division of labor, which assigns the drudgework to women, was the forerunner of slavery, and that "specialization between man and woman helped to render possible that between man and master." By enslaving men (and women) and putting them to women's tasks, a society thereby raised the position of its freewomen, but at the same time these freewomen became economically useless. The result was a paradoxical change that simultaneously raised and lowered freewomen's status. "By the enslavement of men the women were freed from much

of the drudgery that was their lot, and their social status was, in consequence, both elevated and lowered. They were no longer slaves in the fullness of the old sense, yet they must needs sacrifice some of the economic value which they had formerly possessed."[26] Women slaves "relieved some of the burdens of matrimony" by serving as concubines, as mothers, and even as sacrificial substitutes for widows in those societies which practiced ritual immolation of the widow.[27]

In some societies, freewomen may have used their release from drudgery to participate in higher status occupations, or in educational, religious, or artistic activities. Even Engels believed that slavery was a necessary historical step in the progress of civilization, in that it freed some members of the dominant classes for artistic and scientific endeavors; it is questionable, however, whether many of these were ever women.[28] There is anthropological evidence for freewomen's pursuit of higher status occupations in some slave-holding societies. For example, among the Maori, both women and men slaves did women's work: cooking, water carrying, collecting firewood, basket plaiting, and weeding, while freewomen supervised them. In the household, women slaves pounded and cooked fern root, while freewomen did weaving, considered a higher occupation.[29] There are many societies, however, where freewomen, once released from drudgery, simply did nothing. The Northwest Coast Indians used slaves, who represented about one-third of the total population, for unskilled occupations usually filled by women, such as drawing water, gathering firewood, and hauling, gutting, cutting up and smoking fish. Freewomen in these societies, however, when released from gutting fish, did not use their time for any political, artistic, or occupational purpose; they remained idle.[30]

The equation of higher social status for women with idleness and with isolation from political power appears widely. The withdrawal of the

nineteenth-century middle-class American woman from economic productivity has analogues elsewhere, and sometimes the entry of women into a middle or upper-class lifestyle is made possible by the presence of slaves to do women's work. For example, in slave-holding societies of northern Nigeria, freewomen who could afford it frequently sought to enter purdah (seclusion), not only as a mark of raised status, but as a welcome relief from the drudgery of women's agricultural labor.[31] Among the Taureg, slavery made possible the freewoman who was too fat to do anything. In these societies, slavery had the paradoxical effect of both raising and lowering women's status, as Sumner predicted; raising by freeing them from the worst drudgery, lowering by removing their economic usefulness and reducing participation in public life. What were the effects of slavery upon freewomen in North America? Did the presence of female slaves who had no power to protect themselves against the will of the male owner lower the status of all women in the eyes of men, and thus strengthen Southern patriarchy, as Engels might have predicted? Possibly, but this question is difficult to answer. Were Southern white women of the slaveowning class analogous to the Northwest Coast Indian women who lived in idleness, or the northern Nigerian women who lived in purdah while their work was done by slaves? Probably not, for there is evidence that plantation owners' wives, far from being idle, worked very hard at supervising and administering the daily activities of the plantation. Among other duties, the owner's wife was responsible for the health of all slave families on the plantation.[32]

The anthropological and historical evidence, though mixed, indicates that slavery not only relieved freewomen from the worst drudgery, but tended to coexist with a higher status of women, as indicated by women's rights to control property, particularly rights of inheritance. Women's rights over

property are often used as a cross-cultural indicator of women's status, when comparing data from the Human Relations Area files, because other possible indicators, such as political or ritual participation, are frequently absent from field reports. Patterson has found a positive correlation between the existence of slavery in a society and the inheritance of property by women.[33] This leaves unanswered the questions of cause and effect. Does slavery raise the status of women, as Sumner and others have suggested, or, does the raised status of women lead to the development of slavery, because freewomen refuse to do boring and degrading tasks? It is impossible to answer this question from existing evidence. There is, however, a disturbing example from the modern world of the importance of the relationship between women's economic role and the institution of slavery. The Nazis used prisoners as slave laborers, ostensibly because prisoners were the only labor source available and were necessary for the war effort. Yet the Germans had a readily available labor source that they never tapped: their own women. Only 182,000 German women worked in war plants during World War II, as opposed to 2,250,000 in England and 3,000,000 in the United States. Slave labor was founded on the Third Reich's sentimentality about its own women, who were kept at home.[34] There is here a parallel with purdah and the fat Taureg women that suggests that perhaps a society's equation of raised status for women with removal from the workforce contributes to the development of slavery.

4. Women's Occupational Roles Under Slavery

Under slavery, a society's division of labor between the sexes often becomes reversed. Assignment to women's tasks becomes a means of emasculating and degrading male slaves: degradation is a major attribute of slavery. For example, in Hong Kong male slaves were not economically productive; instead,

they did little menial chores under the direction of the owner's wife.[35] Although women slaves have often been assigned to women's tasks, in some slave systems women have been forced to perform men's work, no matter how heavy. In the Caribbean and the United States, proportionately more of the women than of the men were assigned to field labor, even though in parts of the Caribbean where sugar cane was the major crop this strenuous life reduced women's fertility. At Rose Hall plantation in Jamaica, in 1832, 29 out of 60 women, but only 6 out of 51 men were field slaves. At Worthy Park, also in Jamaica, 71% of the women but only 55% of the men were field workers.[36] Men did the heavy work around the sugar mills, but were rewarded with time off and pay for their special skills in refining sugar. This was part of the general pattern of assigning the skilled work to men.

Angela Davis has suggested that because black women were forced to do men's work in the fields, they gained an occupational equality with men slaves and were freed from domination by their own men.[37] In one very important respect, however, the sexual division of labor among slaves in the United States and the Caribbean paralleled that in free society: the skilled and semi-skilled trades, which were associated with high prestige in slave society and in some cases even produced remuneration, were reserved for men. Sometimes, skilled men were allowed to hire themselves out for pay and could save money to buy their freedom. Fieldwork, although heavy, shared with traditional "women's" tasks the characteristic of repetitiveness. Thus under slavery women did the worst of both women's and men's work. A similar situation existed under Nazi slavery. Although the vast majority of enslaved prisoners were male, where women were used they were intentionally assigned to the heaviest of men's work. The Krupp armaments works used fourteen-year-old girls, weighing 100 pounds,

to move heavy machinery by hand, without regard either for efficiency or for the physical capacities of the workers.[38] It appears that sometimes traditional work roles were intentionally reversed under slavery in order to further demarcate the slave from the free.

In the Caribbean, women were assigned to field labor without regard for its effect on their reproductive capacities, and were given little or no time off for childbearing. Along with several factors, such as an unbalanced sex ratio and poor nutrition, this work policy had a negative effect on reproduction, with the result that Caribbean slave populations had to be replenished from Africa. Dr. Collins, a planter, pointed out in his book on the Medical Management of Slaves that on most plantations women were not spared from the hardest work. He urged that new mothers be kept out of the field for one month after the birth, that children be weaned by 14 to 16 months so that the mother would conceive again, and that above all a woman be rewarded for having children. He went as far as to suggest that a woman with six living children be excused from all labor, a suggestion that no planter followed. Most slave women in the Caribbean prolonged nursing for several years, in order to get some time off each day from field duties, and as a result conceptions were spread far apart. Refusal to bear children was perhaps a form of resistance to slavery, especially among Creole women. Collins pointed to the frequency of voluntary abortion in Jamaica, which he said resulted from the "essential hopelessness" of slave women. "Upheld by no consolation, animated by no hope, her nine months of torment issue in the production of a being, doomed like herself, to the reign of eternal servitude, and aggravating, by its claims on maternal support, the weight of her own evils."[39] In the United States, where nutrition was better, fertility was not such a problem as in the islands. There is

no evidence that women slaves in North America were ever part of planned breeding programs; few if any provisions were made to promote childbearing.

5. Rape as a Method of Social Control

Patterson has defined slavery as the extreme range of the power of one human being over another. This power is based on the threat or use of violence. The frequency with which this violence is actually used is less important than the continual threat that it poses to the slave. Rape, or the threat of it is a peculiar form of violence used in some societies for the social control of female slaves; it parallels the threat or use of castration. Rape has sometimes been used to alienate newly-acquired women captives from their former kin and community; a woman so dishonored would be less likely to want to return to her kin, if they would have her back. The autobiographies of white women captured by Indians and forced to live as "Indian wives" indicate that many wished that they had never been rescued, so great was the shame that they had to endure in white society. Some, given their choice, preferred to remain with their captors. Indian women captured by whites received similar or worse treatment, but no autobiographical records have survived.[40] Rape served as a means of alienation from kin and community only for the first generation of slaves, who still referred to the standards of honor in the societies from which they came. Because slaves by definition have no honor in a slaveholding society, in subsequent generations rape became simply another means of violence against which slaves had no defense, and did not alienate a slave woman from her family. In no slave society have male slaves been able to defend their women from this threat, if the rapist was the owner.

This is not to say that all sexual relationships between owners and slaves were based on physical violence. Usually the unequal power relationship was

sufficient to make a women submit, particularly if sexual overtures were repeated over time. Sometimes, if a woman believed that she had something to gain from a relationship with her owner, such as release from fieldwork or freedom for her children, she might actively seek such relations or even regard them as a privilege. In the Caribbean, women sometimes initiated relationships with owners or administrators of plantations in order to "raise the color" of the children, an avenue to limited social mobility and occasionally even manumission.[41] In contrast, in the United States slave women usually had nothing to gain, either for themselves or their children, by being the owner's mistress, and did not initiate such relationships. The fact that many encounters took place without recorded resistance by the woman does not mean that these women were willing participants. Physical violence was not always necessary to convince a woman that it was in her best interests to submit; usually the implicit threat of violence, based on the owner's unlimited power, was sufficient.

It is ironic that most reports of unwanted sexual relationships forced on slave women in the United States have come from the slave narratives of men rather than women. The women's shame and embarrassment was such that they used euphemisms like "tribulations" to refer to what must have amounted to repeated rape. American culture allowed their men, but not the women themselves, to describe more openly the content of these tribulations.[42]

Men of the dominant class never regarded such relationships as rape, no matter how violent, because the slave, although recognized as human in some fundamental sense, was without rights or honor. Greek sources even claimed that sex with a slave was not in the same category as sex with a full human being (freewoman).[43] From the owner's point of view, it was impossible to dishonor a woman who by definition had no honor anyway.

6. Equivalents of Slavery in the Modern World

Does slavery, or some functional equivalent, exist in the modern world, and if so, what is its relationship to the oppression of women? In the traditional sense of personal domination, slavery is found today only in scattered areas on the margins of the modern world, and even there it has been outlawed.[44] Slavery has not disappeared because it is necessarily antithetical to capitalism or to industrial society. Engermann believes that slavery is possible in all kinds of societies, including modern industrial society, as long as slaves can be kept in subjugation.[45] Slaves have worked in industry (sugar refining) in the Caribbean, and as bureaucrats in the Ptolemaic empire. There is no "slave mode of production", just as there is no "women's mode of production." Slavery is adaptable to any mode of production. According to Engermann, slaves would exist today if industry could only find a way of keeping workers in bondage. What has brought slavery to an end has been the increasing effort of keeping slaves in subordination.

Traditional slavery has been replaced by several different types of "functional equivalents," each of which fulfills one or more of the social functions of traditional slavery. In terms of crude economic exploitation, the Third Reich used slavery on a massive scale. The I. G. Farben synthetic rubber and fuel plant at Auschwitz used up 300,000 slaves, and referred to them as such;[46] Krupp also used slaves, but burned their records, so it is impossible to estimate the number. Both the SS, whose property they were, and private industry, which leased them, referred to these prisoners as slaves and used the symbolic methods of dehumanization found in traditional slavery; shaving of the head, strange clothes, changing of the name (to a number). What made Nazi slavery unlike any other slave system in history was the treatment

of people as completely expendable pieces of property (listed , literally, as "pieces"), who were, in the case of the Jews, to be "exterminated through work," a process that took only three months of overwork and starvation at I. G. Farben.

The only historical comparisons are found in ancient "state slavery" such as King Solomon's copper mines in the Sinai and the Greek silver mines at Laurium, where climate and working conditions were so poor that life expectancy was a matter of several years. Although these systems were less personal than most forms of slavery, and although most slaves died, the goal of the system was still production rather than extermination. State slaves were always men.

In contrast, Nazi slavery was devoid of personal elements. It became a system of genocide with economic benefits along the way. It could be argued that this system does not deserve to be called slavery, because its ultimate goal was extermination. On the other hand, perhaps the death camps represent what slavery becomes in Weber's "rationalized" modern world, where affect and personal relationships give way to impersonal treatment.

Some Nazi planners envisioned slavery as a long-term phenomenon that would survive after Germany had won the war. Albert Speer's final volume of memoirs, "The Slave State" (translated under the title "Infiltration"), describes the disagreements between Speer, who was in charge of production, and the SS over what to do with the projected one million slave laborers who would still survive after the winning of the war. Neither side was happy with this prospect, because of the difficulties of keeping such a large labor force in subjection. The SS wanted to continue its policy of extermination until all slaves were eliminated; Speer wanted to spare the slaves and to use

them to rebuild the German economy. His argument was that Germany was short of laborers. (Neither side ever considered employing German women.) Apparently these Nazi planners believed that large-scale slavery was compatible with modern industrial capitalism, as long as ways could be found of subduing the workforce.[47]

If the death camps represent a functional equivalent for the economic aspects of slavery, are there also equivalents for the symbolic and personal aspects of traditional slavery, which in many societies have been the most important aspects of slavery? Perhaps, in the modern world, several kinds of deviants, such as ex-mental patients, or migrant laborers, fulfill the symbolic role of dishonored, kinless outsider, formerly filled by the slave.[48] The slave's central role, however, was that of one who was subject to personal domination, for the psychological and social aggrandisement of the owner. It may be that it is in the domestic sphere that this central symbolic aspect of slavery appears today. Perhaps the natural successor to traditional slavery in the modern world is not the death camps, but wife abuse and child abuse. The family is today the major sphere where almost unlimited personal power can be exercised and where considerable violence can be used without risking legal sanctions. Women have comprised the bulk of slaves throughout history; perhaps they still serve some of the slaves' symbolic roles.

If slavery had its origin historically in sexual stratification, has sexual stratification been based in part on the existence of female slavery? In spite of crucial legal differences between slave and free, it has often been difficult to differentiate between the positions of slave and freewomen because the position of the free is so low that it approximates slavery. It seems logical that a major functional equivalent of slavery today is the subjugation of women.

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